**Board of Early Education and Care**

February 8, 2022

1:00PMPM to 4:00PM

Virtual Meeting:

NOTE: This meeting will be broadcasted over EEC’s YouTube Channel:[*https://youtu.be/XTkPMemHYko*](https://youtu.be/XTkPMemHYko)

**Members of the Board of Early Education and Care Present**

Nonie Lesaux, Chairperson

Jim Peyser, Secretary of Education

Samantha L. Aigner-Treworgy, Commissioner of Early Education and Care (EEC) and Secretary to the Board

Joni Block

Paul Belsito

Jamella Lee

Mora Segal

David Cruise

Alison Schonwald

Sheila Balboni

Nikki Ruiz

**Members of the Board of Early Education and Care Absent**

Carolyn Kain, J.D., Designee for HHS Secretary Marylou Sudders

**The meeting was called to order at 1:00 PM.**

**AGENDA:**

**Items for Discussion and Action:**

1. Department Updates – Discussion
   1. COVID-19 Updates
   2. C3 Operational Grant metrics
2. Strategic Plan Update - Children and Families – Discussion
   1. Addressing Affordable Access to Care
   2. Building Community Capacity and Coordination
3. Caseload Update – Discussion

**Welcome and Comments from the Chair**

Chairperson Lesaux welcomed the Board and shared that the agenda items for today’s meeting will be data driven related to Covid and operational supports, as well as the strategic plan.

**Comments from the Secretary**

Secretary Peyser provided an update to the Governor’s FY23 budget submission and highlighted that the budget allocates over $800M to early education to sustain funding for the combined caseload accounts and includes an expansion for DTA and DCF programs, primarily aimed at improving participation in SNAP employment and training employment programs while providing additional emergency childcare services for DCF children. The budget also supports increases of over $50M to implement the new parent co-pay schedule that will allow 98% of families will to less than 7% of their income on a per child basis. Secretary Peyser pointed out that the Baker administration has increased EEC spending by $275M which is over 50% (not including COVID related expenditures) and prioritized increasing provider rates by $150M cumulatively. Secretary Peyser shared that the Governor plans to propose additional early education investment as part of a supplemental budget filing to use both federal and state resources to extend the stabilization and operational grant program and he anticipates that more information will be released in the coming days.

**Comments from the Commissioner**

Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy thanked the Chair and the Board and provided an overview of the agenda. She expressed excitement for today's discussion to share how the application of data collected influences future planning.

**Routine Business:**

* Vote on minutes from January 11, 2022 Board Meeting – Approved with Nikki Ruiz abstaining

1. Department Updates – Discussion

Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy introduced Caitlin Molina, Deputy Commissioner for Child Care Operations, to provide an update on the impact of the current operational supports and the COVID response to the field. Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy highlighted that EEC is sustaining infrastructure to maintain safe operations and to provide support to programs while returning to normalized operations in terms of program oversight and monitoring. Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy shared that in order to comply with Federal regulations, unannounced program visits will resume in April.

* 1. COVID-19 Updates

Deputy Commissioner Molina elaborated on Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy's comments regarding the return to unannounced visits to programs, citing decreasing COVID numbers, the Commonwealth’s order for proof of vaccination for all employees and distribution of PPE to programs. Deputy Commissioner Molina outlined the strategies to orient back to the unannounced monitoring operating model and stressed that EEC will continue to partner with programs to support them in understanding how to achieve health and safety compliance in alignment with federal mandates. Deputy Commissioner Molina highlighted EEC’s COVID response achievements from the last thirty days, most notably the launch of the testing program, which is the first in the nation. Deputy Commissioner Molina discussed the adjustments to COVID reporting requirements for programs, highlighting that programs are now only required to report cases that impact operations, resulting in significantly decreased case counts in LEAD and a decreased burden on programs. Deputy Commissioner Molina discussed the mobile PCR testing sites and the adjustments made during the COVID surge and maintained commitment to the resource. Deputy Commissioner Molina provided an overview of the rapid antigen testing program and shared that, in partnership with Neighborhood Villages, more than 500,000 tests have been distributed in less than 30 days across more than 3,000 programs. Deputy Commissioner Molina shared that an online portal is launching on February 14 which will allow for more aggregate data and results to be shared. An EPI line is also being launched on February 11 administered by Primary Health, under contract with Neighborhood Villages, to provide programs, families, and educators with supports in relation to COVID and preventing forward transmission. Deputy Commissioner Molina thanked Neighborhood Villages for their leadership and support of distribution, implementation, training, resources, and tool development for the test program.

Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy thanked Deputy Commissioner Molina for her leadership.

Board member Block queried if there was any insight into the structures within the Department that allowed for the swift response that could be utilized for initiatives in the future. Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy pointed to the unique unified oversight of EEC and investments in operational management capacity. Deputy Commissioner Molina highlighted the resiliency of programs and the boldness of the administration to support access to childcare.

* 1. C3 Operational Grant metrics

Jocelyn Bowne, Associate Commissioner for Research and Program Innovation, provided an update on metrics for the C3 Operational Grants and follow-up analysis to understand how the supports provided have impacted stability in the field. Associate Commissioner Bowne highlighted that 84% of programs are participating in the grant, and that access to the grant was expanded in January and enrollment has continued to increase. Associate Commissioner Bowne provided an overview of program stability and discussed patterns of program closures in the past eighteen months and discussed the impact of the funding on closures. Associate Commissioner Bowne highlighted that funding provided by the Department has played an important role in stabilizing the field as intended.

Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy highlighted that there is a higher density of programs with SVI and these programs are not closing at higher rates than non-SVI programs. Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy also highlighted that programs with higher subsidy rates have different compensation than those with largely private fees and there is a linkage of operational costs (i.e, staffing) and the revenue received by programs.

Board member Segal asked for further information about why programs are not participating in the grant program. Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy shared that this is a qualitative question and requires more investigation.

Board member Belsito expressed appreciation for the leadership and encouraged the Board to continue to increase access and stability to providers who are not participating in the funding programs.

Board member Balboni asked if there was any cost benefit to subsidized programs to participate. Associate Commissioner Bowne provided examples of factors that would influence the size of the grant. Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy shared that administrative capacity is limited for smaller programs and that most likely impacts the ability to participate. Board member Belsito highlighted that of the 453 programs that closed, only seven were participating in the grants and stressed that there is a need for the community to find creative ways to add capacity for programs to participate. There was discussion on how to leverage resources to allow EEC to play an efficient role as a statewide department while empowering those who work directly with programs to leverage resources and support a nuanced system.

Chairperson Lesaux reflected on the significant gap in participation of the testing program and the operational grants. Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy discussed that there is ongoing investigation into programs’ participation in multiple support strategies to understand trends.

Board member Segal inquired if any goals have been set in terms of the data. Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy shared that budget discussions will help appropriately set targets and stressed that there is a need to strategize and target programs that are in the highest danger of closing.

Board member Schonwald inquired about reopening data from other states. Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy shared that it is difficult to compare based on different definitions of child care in different states and there needs to be structures and systems in place to meet the needs of shifting populations.

Break until 2:10PM

1. Strategic Plan Update - Children and Families – Discussion

Chairperson Lesaux commented that the second part of the discussion will connect the strategic plan with affordable access to care for families. Chairperson Lesaux discussed the need to consider the child care system less as slots to be filled and more as places to serve children.

Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy provided historical context on the strategic plan and highlighted the need for development of systems and investment in enhancement of systems. Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy discussed how investments and strategies implemented in the past few years informs what needs to be done going forward.

* 1. Addressing Affordable Access to Care

Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy highlighted that prior to COVID, systems designed to address access to affordability strategies needed to be updated. Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy stated that many policies put in place due to COVID for subsidy regulations may be kept in place as we address revisions to our regulatory framework. Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy stated that it is important to understand the intersection of investment in infrastructure and the affordability strategies available to access the critical infrastructure, which operates as a private market, and how that fits into a broader community context.

Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy highlighted the restructuring of the EEC organizational chart to build capacity, increase collaboration, and set priorities.

Eli Cole provided an update on the current data regarding the subsidy system and the income eligibility pathway. The income eligibility pathway represents the largest share of subsidy utilization and provides EEC with the greatest mechanism for change through policy and contracted supports. Ms. Cole highlighted that DTA and DCF provide additional pathways to the subsidy system. Ms. Cole discussed utilization patterns and noted that overall utilization is decreasing across every age group and in every subsidy region, although there is no way to account for variable family needs and choices when looking at population data. Ms. Cole highlighted the Northeast and Metro regions to highlight how the data and dynamics can inform future thinking on subsidy participation. Ms. Cole summarized that, pre-pandemic, the subsidy system was not reaching a threshold of income eligible families and there has been a decline across every dimension. The subsidy system is one of the biggest levers within EEC’s control to address the strategic plan goal of affordable access. It will be necessary to undertake serious strategies to reverse trends seen throughout the pandemic including leveraging subsidy policies, waitlist management, structures for subsidy administration, and other mechanisms that impact family participation. Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy highlighted that trends have not shifted significantly in the past few months and stressed that subsidies deal with affordability but do not deal with infrastructure. Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy stated that more qualitative investigation is needed to understand the trend of decreased enrollment and increased waitlist numbers.

There was discussion regarding priority factors identified prior to COVID that lead to barriers to accessibility. Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy identified the complicated nature of enrolling in subsidies and the difficulty of demonstrating income eligibility and stated that regulatory changes would be required to simplify the subsidy eligibility criteria and remain in federal compliance. Board member Balboni reflected that staff compensation issues continue to need to be addressed. Board member Ruiz echoed that the system is complex for families and stated the administrative burden is an impediment to economic mobility and needs to be reduced for families. Board member Segal inquired how the passage of Build Back Better would impact funding and eligibility and Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy stated that the passage of Build Back Better would have created more urgency with a tighter timeline to set priorities. There was discussion regarding data collection and creating feedback loops with partners who can inform on community specific populations and creating a data use culture with a direct line to policy. Chairperson Lesaux inquired on how to utilize technology to make the subsidy system more accessible. Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy discussed current infrastructure innovation capacity that can be utilized by CCR&Rs and the ongoing conversations with the CCR&Rs to prioritize available resources. Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy provided an overview of current regulations that have been put in place during COVID. Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy highlighted the question of how to streamline the process for entitlement pathways. Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy stressed that EEC’s investment in the field is a multi-year strategy that will be informed and robust.

* 1. Building Community Capacity and Coordination

Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy provided an update on community investments to the Commonwealth Preschool Partnership Initiative and Family Ambassador Program. Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy reiterated that EEC plays an essential role in providing affordable access both to childcare infrastructure, and to community level infrastructure enhancement and investments. Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy provided an overview of the Commonwealth Preschool Partnership Initiative (CPPI) and shared how an increase in funding offered an opportunity to implement strategies learned from the Commonwealth Preschool Partnership Initiative. Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy discussed how investments in universal preschool impacts the overall childcare system and shared EEC’s efforts to expand the preschool system, including building grants to allow for communities to plan and implement for the overall impact of expansion. Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy highlighted the Family Ambassador Program and shared that parent to parent communication is the best strategy to inform and empower parent leadership. Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy provided insight into the intention to expand the Preschool Partnership Initiative. There was further discussion regarding CPPI and the opportunities available for preschool expansion, regardless of the setting. Board member Block expressed appreciation for the Family Ambassador Program. Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy shared that understanding evidence-based models help to think about investments strategically and bring in the most advantageous resources for future investments.

1. Caseload Update – Discussion

Chairperson Lesaux noted that the caseload update has been covered. Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy highlighted that the month over month data provided on page 25 of the materials and noted that this is an area that isn’t seeing dramatic changes. Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy shared that there is a Subsidy 101 slide deck that can be provided to help to help inform conversations around trends.

Chairperson Lesaux suggested a special session to dig into the data trends.

Meeting adjourned 3:30PM